Book Reviews

Peter Black, with Erma Hermens


A most welcome recent trend in exhibitions has been the focused show on a single artwork that places it in context and often includes a publication. The book under review accompanied such an exhibition, and offers insight into the various ways a single painting opens an investigation into a significant portion of the artist’s oeuvre. Rembrandt’s small grisaille Entombment of Christ, oil on oak panel, has been well known in the literature, and it gains interest with monographic treatment.

Painted between about 1635–1639, it may have been retained by the artist, as it may correspond to an item in his 1656 inventory; thereafter, it may have belonged to Ferdinand Bol, a pupil of Rembrandt, in whose 1669 inventory a similar item is listed. By the 1760s, it probably belonged to the French printmaker Pierre-François Basan, who etched it with the title “Les Morts Ensevelis [Burying the Dead].” The English printmaker Robert Strange then owned it in London. The physician William Hunter (1718–1783) acquired it at Strange’s auction in 1771, when it was identified as “Lazarus Entombed.” Hunter bequeathed his encyclopedic collection to Glasgow University, which established the Hunterian Museum. Eventually, Rembrandt’s panel was properly recognized as the burial of Christ following the crucifixion and admired for its combination of brilliant sketchiness and expressiveness.

Rembrandt’s grisaille has generally been regarded as either a design for a print that was never made or an independent painting. The methodical discussion of its purpose here concerns Rembrandt’s publishing efforts during the early 1630s that involved Jan van Vliet making a number of etchings after Rembrandt’s designs, and in particular, two scenes from the Passion of Christ: Descent from the Cross and Ecce Homo. The Entombment would seem to be a suitable subject to add to these, but it is horizontal in format while the other
two are vertical; and, in any case, no print was made after it. More credibly, it seems that the sketch was made as a stand-alone image, with oil paint freely applied, thickly in some places and thinly in others. Such a variation in painterly application recurs through Rembrandt’s oeuvre, and here, leads to a discussion of the opposition of finish and rough manners, in both paintings and prints. Made during the years Rembrandt was working on the Entombment for the series of paintings of Christ’s Passion for the Stadholder Frederik Hendrik, it seems that the Glasgow oil sketch is a rethinking of the setting, lighting, and figural groupings.

Scenes from the Passion of Christ proliferate in Rembrandt’s work, so a thematic discussion ranges widely among the artist’s drawings, prints and paintings. Of the forty-two works included in the exhibition and others illustrated, one omission may be noted: the etching, c. 1642–1645, Christ Carried to the Tomb, which portrays a group of figures carrying the body of Christ on a makeshift stretcher of cloth wrapped around two poles toward a cave for burial. Of the many variations on the subject, this image suggests that the support of the stretcher may have eased the burden for those carrying the body. Rembrandt’s other depictions show the body carried in a cloth. According to the gospels, Christ’s body was wrapped in a linen cloth. In general, artists portrayed Christ in this scene only partially covered by cloth and often merely a loincloth. With some artists, as Rubens, the minimal covering would emphasize the heroic powerful physique of Christ; with others, as Rembrandt, the thin limbs indicate vulnerability and humanity.

Rembrandt’s collection of paper art was among the most extensive of any in Amsterdam at the time, and much has been written about his use of it in his own works. Within the works exhibited and comparative material, the curators included some of the paper art owned by Rembrandt and from which he made drawn copies or etched variations. These include prints and drawings by Rubens, Barocci, Raphael, and Mantegna. In the Glasgow Entombment, Rembrandt seems to have recalled motifs from engravings after Dirck Barendsz and Rubens but crafted the composition without overt reference to precedent, either in the specific figural arrangement and in, for example, the head of Christ, with open mouth showing teeth, as if just recently passed from the living. Rembrandt rendered the carrying and placing of Christ in the tomb in over fifteen drawings, prints, and paintings, and their distinct differences demonstrate Rembrandt’s inventiveness, a quality recognized during and shortly after his lifetime by the writers Samuel van Hoogstraten and Arnold Houbraken. Their observations are sprinkled throughout the essays, and give a theoretical background to the Glasgow Entombment. The broader context of print culture for Rembrandt is further examined in Peter van der Coelen, Rembrandt’s Passie.